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ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of deep-structure sociocultural transfer and its impact on second language learning. It reviews three case studies of Chinese students in the United States, describing how the students allowed their native sociocultural values and beliefs to dominate their communications with Americans, even though they had resided in the United States for several years. The study also reports on research that sought to determine why sociocultural transfer is still a problem among people who have studied the target language and been exposed to its culture for some time. Twenty Chinese students at Oklahoma State University were interviewed and given a questionnaire to determine their responses to compliments in English. Results indicated that only four subjects made no transfer errors, with the majority giving at least one Chinese sociocultural response to compliments (negating the speaker's compliment). Responses to the questionnaire revealed that although 75 percent of the students knew the appropriate American response (expressing thanks), they unconsciously employed the native Chinese speech pattern. Learning the sociocultural values and rules of the target culture may not ensure acquisition if they are not applied in everyday usage. A copy of the questionnaire is appended. (MDM)

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ED 371 597

Deep Sociocultural Transfer and Its Effect on Second Language Speakers' Communication

Dilin Liu

Because of the studies by Sapir (1949) and Whorf (1956) and by those who followed, we enjoy the privilege of understanding how culture and language are closely interwoven and how our sociocultural values and beliefs frame the way we think and speak. This understanding about language has, in turn, had a great impact on studies in intercultural communication and second language acquisition. For example, Condon & Yousef (1975), Damen (1987), Fantini (1984, 1991, 1992), Kramsch (1993), and Seele (1984), among others, examined the importance of understanding the sociocultural values of the target language for people engaged in both second language (L2) learning and intercultural communication. They found that mastery of L2 linguistic patterns only does not ensure one to communicate effectively in the language. The development of a second language, as Fantini (1992) points out, involves not acquiring a linguistic tool but also, and more importantly, adopting a new world view embedded in the second language's culture (14). To be able to communicate in another language, one should understand not only the language itself but also the underlying principles of that culture. To these scholars, a cultural education is absolutely essential in both second language acquisition and intercultural communication. Similarly, some ESOL researchers and instructors (Byrd, 1986; Irving, 1984; to cite a few) studied how cultural understanding is crucial in the success of ESOL classes. They demonstrated that unawareness of cultural differences often leads to conflicts or breakdown in communication between the instructor and the students as well as among students themselves who are usually

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from different cultural backgrounds.

By foregrounding the importance of cultural understanding in second language acquisition, these scholars have made great contributions in intercultural communication and language education. Yet few of them have examined in detail from a social and psychological perspective the influence of L2 speakers' native sociocultural values on their use of the target language. Beebe (1983, 1988), Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984), Cohen & Olshtain, (1981, 1983), Olshtain (1983), and Wolfson (1989) were among the pioneers in this field. Employing Speech Act Theory, they examined how L2 learners often attempt to use speech patterns in their native language to accomplish speech acts in the second language. For example, Cohen and Olshtain (1981) analyzed the apologies made by both native speakers' of Hebrew learning English and native speakers of English, and found that, due to the influence of their native language, Israeli ESL students were less likely to offer repair or acknowledge responsibility, and expressed less degree of regret than did native American speakers. Beebe (1988) calls this type of practice "sociocultural transfer," and identified it as one of the major problems that prevents L2 learners from communicating effectively in the target language.

While these studies helped us see sociocultural transfer in ESOL, they addressed mostly the difference in speech patterns between languages (the different ways of expressing gratitude, apologies, etc.). In other words, they looked primarily at the learners' observable sociocultural transfer, and overlooked the transfer of deep sociocultural values and beliefs that caused the surface changes in both what we say and how we say it. [To differentiate the transfer of deep sociocultural values from the

transfer of speech patterns, the former will hereafter be called "deep-structure" sociocultural transfer and the latter surface sociocultural transfer.] The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the existence of deep-structure sociocultural transfer and its impact on L2 learners' communication. A close examination of three actual cases of deep-structure sociocultural transfer will be presented, followed by a report and discussion of an empirical study on issues related to sociocultural transfer and L2 learners' acquisition of sociocultural competence in the target language.

Deep-Structure Transfer of Sociocultural Values and Its Effect on L2 Speakers' Communication

The influence of native sociocultural values and beliefs on L2 speakers is a very important question because, although deep-structure sociocultural transfer is very difficult to detect, it affects L2 learners' communication in the target language as much as surface structure transfer does. Such deep-structure transfer may also help explain why some L2 speakers who possess a fairly good command of the target language and have a basic understanding of its customs still cannot communicate appropriately in that language. The following cases of poor or no communication between Chinese students and Americans will clearly illustrate this point.

In the first case, a Chinese student, whose wife was killed by a speeding car while crossing a street, sued the driver for compensation. During the deposition, the defendant lawyer asked why he wanted to sue and whether it was for money. He answered he did it for the sake of justice, not for money. Then the lawyer asked why he had not visited his daughter in China (at the time

of the deposition, it was already a year since his wife's death), and whether he waited for the money from the lawsuit to do so. Again, he said he was not waiting for money but for justice, an act leading to a complete breakdown of communication, which can be seen clearly in the following dialogue quoted from the deposition (Q signifies the lawyer and A the student):

Q: Why are you waiting for this lawsuit to be over to go to China?

A: Yes. I am waiting for the justice.

Q: You're waiting for justice?

A: Yes.

Q: And by justice you mean money?

A: Money?

Q: Money.

A: Not.

. . . . . .

Q: What do you -- the only thing you are after is money, isn't it, in this lawsuit?

A: No. Basically the idea is justice.

. . . . . .

Q: The only thing the court does here is, if it awards it at all, is money. Is money justice in China?

A: Sure. (please notice here that he did acknowledge money is justice but would not say he was after it)

Q: I see. So you're waiting for the money arising from this lawsuit before you go to China, correct.

A: Not correct.

Q: Incorrect?

A: Incorrect.

Q: Okay. What are you waiting for?

A: I am waiting for justice. Probably no money, but the final charge [verdict] . . . I tried my best, okay.

Q: You tried your best?

A: Right. Because I lost my wife. I should try my best.

Q: To do what?

A: To do the lawsuit.., right. That's why I stay here.

Q: Is it for the money?

A: Why for the money? I don't know how. . . . No. No money. Not for money.

Q: Then what justice -- what is your definition of justice?

The defendant's lawyer became totally confused and frustrated. There was much talk, but no communication. Seeing the impasse between them, the student's (plaintiff's) own lawyer said that his client was suing for money and needed the money in order to visit his daughter in China. Yet the student, as the defendant's lawyer said in a retort to the student's lawyer, "never said that [he was after money], but if that's the reason, that's fine and if he's waiting for the money from the lawsuit, that fine, too. But I just need to know what it is."

To most Americans, this Chinese student would seem ridiculous and totally incomprehensible. The problem here is that the student was locked up in his native sociocultural beliefs when communicating with people whose value system was entirely different. In China, money has never been deemed as positively as it has in the U.S., and it is almost a taboo for people to openly declare money to be their purpose for doing something, even when it is true. That is why it is not uncommon to hear Chinese businessmen, when discussing business with foreigners, talk about doing it for the sake of promoting friendship between China and the outside world. With this background information, we can

easily see why the student never acknowledged he was suing for money in the lawsuit.

The second case concerns a Chinese student, who overpaid his rent and tried to get a refund from his landlord. When this student signed his lease, he paid the first month's rent of $175, a $75 deposit and the last month's rent. But the student mistook the last month's rent as part of his deposit, so he paid the last month's rent to the landlord's agent again, and did not know it until his deposit was refunded. After the student had talked to the agent about it, the latter asked him to write a letter to the landlord asking for a refund. The student wrote the letter and showed it to this author. Surprisingly, about three-fifths of the letter (which had a total of about 200 words) were about what a nice person he was (honest and diligent) and how hard he had worked to take care of the house (such as sweeping the floor twice a day, mopping it once a week, etc.). Only two-fifths of the letter were devoted to the real issue (explaining the case and asking for a refund). Such a letter would certainly not be considered effective to most Americans because whether the student was a nice person and how hard he worked in keeping the house clean were not really important or relevant to the issue. He should have stressed the key point that he overpaid. However, to a Chinese reader, what kind of a person the student was would certainly be relevant here.

To understand this point, we need to have some background information about the Chinese notion of law. As Hsu (1981), a famous scholar on Sino-American cultural studies, pointed out, "In the Chinese philosophy, the interpretation of law is based upon human feelings and situations not upon absolute standards" (p. 381). In other words, the concept of law in China is defined

in human terms and "has no place for abstract or absolute notions of right and wrong. . . . what is right for the father may be wrong for the son, or what is permissible in one situation may be punishable in another" (Hsu, p. 381). To a large degree, what is important to be a successful individual is to be considered a good person in terms of the morality and politics prevalent at the time. Besides, it is usually the authority (mostly the government) that determines whether one is a good person or not. If a person is considered "good," it would not hurt you much even if you violate some law or regulation. But if you are labeled as a "bad person," and if you happen to break some law, you will be more severely punished than the law dictates. Moreover, even if you violate nothing, as a "bad person," you will often be deprived of your right to enjoy what you are entitled to by the law. That is why, during the Cultural Revolution, many politically "bad" people had their property confiscated, and some were not even allowed to marry, or forced to divorce if already married.

With this information in mind, we can understand why the student spent three-fifths of his letter in showing that he was a good person; he was trying, though unconsciously, to convince the landlord that he was worthy of the refund. This example corroborates what Maurice (1986) pointed out: "cultural values and assumptions mold what we perceive as relevant facts and irrelevant trivia" (p. 40).

A similar but more severe case that Irving (1984) reported in her study further testifies to the truth of the statement. A Japanese firm lost a business deal with an American company, simply because in their letter to the Americans, the Japanese devoted the first paragraph to talk about the cherry blossoms

then in bloom, and never stated their interest in the deal as openly as the Americans would have done. So the Americans thought that the Japanese were not serious about the deal, and looked for another international venture. It is clear now that what seems relevant to the people of one culture may prove to be irrelevant or trivial to those of another.

Like the first two examples, the student in the third case also let her native sociocultural values dictate what she wanted to say and how to say it. She was caught by the police making a left turn while in the right lane. When the police gave her a citation, she would not accept it, proclaiming that she was a good person and had never broken a traffic rule before. Her argument, as we can expect, failed to appeal to the policeman. Then she said to the policeman "You don't have a good heart. Policemen should have a good heart and help people, but you don't." The policeman was at a loss to understand what she was saying and told her that if she would not accept the ticket, she could go to the court. Yet she still refused to sign it. The police then told her that if she defied the law, the court would send her to jail. She answered, "No way, jail not for me. Jail is for bad people." Seeing it meaningless to talk to her, the policeman finally gave up, and called his superior for help. The lack of communication here arose primarily from the girl's Chinese thinking pattern in her argument. Both her focus on herself as a good person and her insistence on the police having a good heart best reflect the Chinese style of thinking and arguing--a style oriented towards person rather than towards fact. In of all the three above examples, we see clearly that what caused the breakdown of communication was not surface-structure transfer but deep-structure transfer of native

sociocultural values and beliefs. This fact suggests that both L2 speakers and people involved in intercultural communication should try to have a good understanding of the deep sociocultural values of both languages. Knowledge of the subject will help them see some of the communication problems they would not understand otherwise.

One more significant fact about these three cases is that the three students all had been in the U.S. for more than two years when their respective incidents happened. This fact raises the question of why they still allow their native sociocultural values and beliefs to dominate their communication with Americans after they have been exposed to the American culture for a considerable period of time. To answer this question, three hypotheses were set forth: 1. sociocultural transfer is still a problem among people who have studied the target language and been exposed to its culture for quite some time; 2. these people may know the surface differences between the native and target cultures, but they still may not know the deep structure differences; 3. even if they know the sociocultural differences, they may still unconsciously transfer their native speech patterns and cultural values into their use of the target language. A two-part study was conducted to test the hypotheses.

The Study (Subjects and procedure)

The study was composed of two parts: 1. observation of Chinese students' responses to compliments in English, and a questionnaire. For the first part, responses to compliments in English were solicited and observed without the subjects' knowledge from twenty Chinese students studying at Oklahoma State University. All these students had studied English for more than

six years and had been in the U.S. for more than half a year (when reporting their length of stay in the U.S., the students were asked to round off their years of stay to the nearest half-year, i.e. 0.5 year). The reason to choose to observe responses to compliments was that the typical response to compliments in Chinese is significantly different from that in English (in the former, the speaker is supposed to negate what is being complimented for, a response meant to show the speaker's modesty, a quality valued very highly in that culture; in the latter, it is to say "Thank you," an answer meant not only to show appreciation but also to end further conversation on the matter). Chinese learners of English, especially beginners, often respond to compliments in English using the Chinese way, a transfer that often produces unwanted consequences because the Chinese response means to the native speaker a request for more compliment. During a period of three months, four different compliments (such as "You speak excellent English." "You did an wonderful job in . . ." "You look very pretty/handsome today") were made to each of the subjects in the appropriate context and their responses were recorded each time either as "transfer" or "no transfer." Next, both individual and group percentages of nontransfer and transfer responses were calculated. The Pearson Product-Movement Correlation between the subjects' years of English study and their nontransfer and transfer responses was determined. The same correlational measurement was employed between subjects' length of stay in the U.S. and their responses. For the second part of the study, a questionnaire (see Appendix) was given to these students after the observation was completed; all of whom responded. The questionnaire was composed of eight questions. Questions 1, 2, and 3 were intended to test whether the students

knew the common surface sociocultural differences (the different speech patterns). Questions 4 and 5 were meant to determine their level of understanding of the deep sociocultural differences which caused the surface changes; Question 6 was designed to find out if they knew that they sometimes still unconsciously transferred their native sociocultural values into their use of English, and Questions 7 and 8 were formed to help determine how the students generally learned about the sociocultural differences.

Results and Discussions

The findings of both the observation and the questionnaire basically supported the hypotheses. According to the observation record, of all the subjects, only four (30%) made no transfer responses at all. Of the fourteen who did, two had three transfer responses (75% of their total), three had two (50%), and nine had

Insert Table Here

one (25%). In other words, 26% of the total eighty responses were transfer errors. The percentage may not look very high. But we have to remember the transfer examined here is surface-structure transfer, and if there is close to thirty percent surface structure transfer in these students' speech, more deep-structure transfer in their use of the language is very likely to be expected.

The findings from the questionnaire are also interesting and informing. The answers to the first three questions showed that all twenty students knew the different speech patterns. Yet responses to Questions Four and Five revealed that few of them

truly understood what causes the surface-structure differences. To the question of why they would not say the same thing to an American as they would to a Chinese when responding to a compliment or an offer, most of them gave an "I-don't-know" answer or a circular answer like "it is because of the different customs." Their replies to Questions Six sustain the second hypothesis, for fifteen of the students (75%) said in answering the question that they had experienced a situation in which they knew the appropriate American way for fulfilling a speech act, but they still unconsciously employed the native Chinese speech pattern. For example, some students said that they knew they should say "Thank you!" to a compliment in English, yet often, they would unconsciously say "No. Not really."

This finding suggests that there might be a gap between learning L2 sociocultural values and acquiring them. Similar to the differentiation Krashen made between language learning and language acquisition, sociocultural learning is a conscious act whereas its acquisition may be a subconscious process. There may be a gap between knowing sociocultural rules and applying them in real communication. The story a student gave in his answer well illustrates the point. He was invited to a dinner, from which he returned with a half-empty stomach because of his inability to communicate appropriately with his American host. When his host asked him whether he wanted more food, he said, without thinking, "no" (a Chinese way of showing politeness) though he knew that he should say "yes" in order to get the food he needed. Seeing his host start clearing the table, he wanted to change his answer, but he did not do it because he felt it disgraceful to do so. When asked why he answered "no" in the first place when he knew in America he should say "yes" if he wanted more food, he

replied "I just automatically said it, and immediately after I said it, I knew it was wrong." Similar cases were also found in other students' answers. The student who wrote the letter asking for a refund of his overpaid rent also said that he knew that the part about his personality in his letter was not really relevant to an American reader, but he did not think about it when he put it there.

If acquiring sociocultural competence is indeed different from learning it, exposure to the target culture would presumably be the only way to acquire it, just as Krashen (1981) showed in language acquisition. The questionnaire findings support this hypothesis. In answering Question Seven concerning how they learned to know the sociocultural differences, nineteen (95%) picked D ("I learned them from interacting with Americans"). As for Question Eight that asked which of the ways they thought most effective in learning these differences, eighteen students (90%) picked D as the best way. The students' response echoes most scholars on this issue: the best way to understand the values of both a new culture is to be immersed in it.

However, three more questions remain to be answered: 1) how students, when interacting with native speakers, acquire the deep-structure differences (or what causes the acquisition), 2) what would constitute comprehensible input at this level, and 3) what should L2 teachers do and what effects would it have on L2 speaker's communication if the speaker has a strong antagonism towards the L2 culture and refuses to learn it. One answer to the first part of the question may be to help the learner know the importance of understanding L2 culture and understand that learning L2 culture should not be a subtraction from one's native culture but a positive addition in a world where intercultural

communication is becoming commonplace.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The examination of the three cases and the findings from the study yield four tentative conclusions. 1. Deep-structure sociocultural transfer exists, and seriously affects L2 speakers' communication. What remains uncertain is whether there is a difference in the extent of deep-structure sociocultural transfer between beginning and advanced learners. In addition to answering this question, more comprehensive studies need be conducted on sociocultural differences between specific cultures, such as between Egypt and America. Such studies will help us identify deep-structure sociocultural transfer in our students' speech and writing. Fantini (1988, etc.) has completed some interesting work in this area. 2. Learning L2 sociocultural values and rules may not ensure acquisition because knowing these values and rules does not mean that one can and will apply them in his/her thinking and communication. 3. The best way for L2 learners to acquire sociocultural competence is to become immersed in the society of the target language. This, however, does not mean that teaching sociocultural differences is of no use to students' acquisition process. Rather, it simply requires L2 researchers and educators to work harder to find out how learning and teaching sociocultural values will help students acquire cultural competence. 4. Further studies need to be conducted to determine the effects on L2 speakers' communication if a speaker is antagonistic towards L2 culture and what L2 educators should do about it. The one clear thing to emerge from this study is that teachers need to go beyond the surface patterns to exploration of the underlying principles of the culture.

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Appendix

A Questionnaire

Before you start, please tell

1. how long you have studied English _____, and

2. how long you have been in the U.S. _____.

1. How will you usually respond if a Chinese compliments you, saying that your are bright or you are an excellent student? How will you respond if it is an American who does the complimenting? (if you will respond in the same way in the second case, please write "the same.")?

   a. In the first case, I will usually say _____.

   b. In the second case, I will usually say _____.

2. What will you say when you are visiting a Chinese friend and your host asks you whether you would like to have a drink and you prefer to have one? What will you usually say if your host is an American?

   a. In the fist case, I will usually say _____.

   b. In the second case, I will usually say _____.

3. If a Chinese friend of yours invites you to eat out, will you usually offer to pay for the bill after the meal? If it is an American friend who invites you, will you act the same way or differently?

   a. In the first case, I will usually _____.

   b. In the second case, I will usually _____.

4. If your reaction to an American usually differs from your reaction to a Chinese in the above situations, explain why:

5. If you think that the Chinese people act differently from the American people on occasions like the above, could you please explain why?

6. Have you ever had the experience that, even thought you know the particular American speech pattern, you regressed to the Chinese pattern (for example, you know that when people compliment you here, you should say "Thank you." But occasionally you say "No, no" instead)? If you have had such experience,

please briefly describe where and how it happened.

7. If you know some of the differences between Chinese and American cultures, please indicate how you learnt about them by circling any of the following (you may circle as many as you think applying to you).

a. My teacher explained them to me.

b. Someone else told me about them.

c. I learned about them from my reading.

d. I learned about them from interacting with Americans

8. Please circle the one item in the above question that you believe is most effective in helping you understand the cultural differences.

A B C D

TABLE

Student	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Total
Years of English Study	15	14	14	14	13	13	13	12	12	11	10	9	9	9	8	8	7	7	7	6	
Years of Study in U.S.	1	3	0.5	2	0.5	1.5	2.5	1.5	1	0.5	1.5	1	0.5	1.5	1.5	0.5	4	2	0.5	2	
Total Responses	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	80
Non-Transfer Response	3	4	3	4	2	3	4	3	4	2	3	3	1	3	4	2	4	3	1	3	59
Transfer Response	1	0	1	0	2	1	0	1	0	2	1	1	3	1	0	2	0	1	3	1	21
Percentage of Transfer Response	25	0	25	0	50	25	0	25	0	50	25	25	75	25	0	50	0	25	75	25	26

The person R correlation between the students' years of study and their social/cultural competence (non-transfer responses) was .282 with $p>0.1$.
The Pearson R correlation between the students' years of stay in the United States and their non transfer responses was .0.705 with $p<0.001$.